

# TO MARS

AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

*Pirated Edition*



HANA AIANHANMA

**To Mars**  
**and other Short Stories**

**by**  
**Hana Aianhanma**

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All stories in this book are made up. Notwithstanding that some places described may really exist, the events remain fictional. Resemblances to any being, real or imagined, are coincidental.

*For my wife.*

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## To Mars

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Humanity was ready to send an expedition to Mars again. The technology had matured for decades, the finances cobbled together, and the will to go had been whipped up by a masterful campaign. Unfortunately, corruption put a spanner in the works.

### *First Part*

Leana was not happy.

“What do you mean, that engineer disappeared?”

After that short pause, inherent to any communication at such a long distance, the answer came.

“We can't find him. In fact, neither can we find the people who were responsible for double checking his department's work.”

This was not supposed to happen. Everything seemed fine right until leaving moon orbit. Constructions did look a bit fancy. None of the astronauts really cared for those flashy designs. Stuff would break, so repairs would wear down the glitter in no time. Still, they assumed everything would function as it should. Why polish things up if they did not work yet?

“Let me get this straight. I've only got fuel for either touchdown or to return but

not both and,” she frowned at the screen's camera, “the people responsible for making sure we had enough for both disappeared?”

That pause again. It was not enough to fully interrupt the conversation but plenty to be annoying. Especially at times like this.

“Erm, yes.” Mission control looked down. “With the funds.”

“Great.” She sighed. “Doesn't really matter that much after last week's explosion.”

“Ah, about that.” Remarkable, the places one can look at while still missing the camera. “We also tried to have an extra chat with the life support people.”

“And?”

“Turns out they forged their reports.”

“What?” Her voice got louder a notch.

“And they misappropriated about 90% of the budget.”

The astronaut hung speechless.

“After that discovery the FBI butted in.”

“Good!”

“They really are thorough at investigating.”

“They should be.”

“They even questioned *me!*”

“Stop procrastinating. Who stole the fucking money?” She never cursed.

This was a special occasion.

“The FBI arrested about a hundred people. Their sleuthing also led straight to the head of NASA.”

Grimly, “I hope they still have her when I get back.”

“Errr...”

Her face turned red. “Don't tell me!”

“She's also nowhere to be found.”

“Unbelievable.”

“According to witnesses, she and all managers were picked up in black vans.”

“Black vans? you don't mean?”

“Yes, picked up and deported by presidential order.”

“Did they ask the president why?”

“Well, about that ...”



She stared numbly now. She had thought nothing more would shock her.

“... he's gone too.”

## ***Second Part***

Leana had worked for years. First she turned her dream of becoming an astronaut into reality, enduring the gruelling training programme. Then she got herself selected for the first mission to Mars and, finally, she was part of the national effort to actually get there. How naive they had all turned out to be.

Murdered by their own president's greed. He had not been content with just a few millions or even billions. He had taken all but enough to launch a skeleton ship able to reach Mars, polished dramatically for the cameras. Despite looking the part, it was a miracle the crew transport even launched at all. From the awkward pauses from mission control she gathered that, by all rights, it should have crashed then and there with everyone in it. It did not make much of a difference for her twelve colleagues, who died during that explosion in life support. Ironically, she herself would flourish thanks to them not using up the supplies, which would have been insufficient for a full crew.

Her dreams had turned into a steady stream of nasty and imaginative tortures she would visit upon him when she got back. If he was ever found, that is.

The worst part of it was that, after all that misery, she would get a good look at the planet from orbit only to return to Earth.

She really would enjoy pulling those nails.

### ***Third Part***

Her anger was spent long ago. She stared down. Mars! The first leg of the journey was done. She had done well to keep this wreck going so far. Getting back home would be tough, but she and mission control were confident that, barring any external disasters, she would make it. Pity about the fuel situation.

The news from Earth was not good. When the scandal became known, sentiment had turned against space travel again. For the foreseeable future manned space missions, let alone a Mars one, were going to be out of the question.

She kept looking at the red planet.

A message arrived from mission control. “This is the last update before your return blast. All telemetry indicates a go. Fire up the engines at five minutes after reception of the signal.”

A beep sounded.

She had been forced to cobble together some manual controls. Most computers had broken down. Guess where the money for the shielding went.

“Four minutes from reception of the signal.”

Another beep.

The ship itself did not have enough fuel, so she would have to use the lander's for those orbital manoeuvres. A few carefully timed blasts and Mars' gravity would be swinging her back in no time.

“Three minutes from reception of the next signal.”

Again, a beep.

Still staring at the red globe, the destination of her dreams.

Unreachable.

Beep.

Unreachable?

She had made her decision a few days ago, after carefully checking the calculations. She had modified them where needed.

Beep.

The hatch was sealed. With the press of a button the lander, with her in it, detached. Time seemed to slow down, what was keeping that signal?

Beep.

The engine roared to life. The last leg of her journey had begun. She *would* walk on the surface of Mars after all.

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## Method

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“The old trains used to just have a hole.”

The old man had drunk quite a bit.

“A hole?”

“I mean, they had toilets and all, but look down one and you could see the tracks.”

“Tracks?”

“Anything that drops down through them during the ride is lost forever.”

“Drops down?”

*“Please don't use the toilets when the train has stopped at a station.”*

Yes, definitely inebriated.

“Bad for the smell, see?”

“I don't quite follow what that's got to do with my question.”

“Everything with why I hate that question.”

“You'd think they would be able to clean the tracks there, it's outside, you know?”

I interjected, “Except when the station has a roof.”

“Very few roofed stations in the country I lived in, back then.”

“Country?”

“Belgium.”

“Had some problems moving stateside.”

“I can image, with the visa requirements.”

“Oh, not that,” he waved that away, “it was the beer I brought with me.”

“Taxes?”

“The labels. You barbarians don't know art when you see it.”

He must have noticed my befuddlement, so he changed subject on me.

“Used to have one, to answer it.” He gulped down the remainder of the glass of whatever poison he was drinking.

“What?”

“Your question.”

“Used to?”

“Treasure of our lives.”

“If you don't want to talk about it ...”

“No I don't.”

“Then ...”

“The wife and I had this little kid. Little one charmed me the day she was born.”

I poured each of us a glass of beer. Had to make sure he wouldn't touch that poison again, after all. He looked at it suspiciously. “What's this piss?”

“It's beer.”

“You call that beer?”

I carefully inspected my glass. “Yees?”

“Hah!”

He took a swig, “Piss,” and finished the contents. “I've tasted better stuff that people used to drink when beer was too expensive.”

I stared. “Why drink it, if it's so bad?”

“Sometimes one enjoys the drink,” he took my glass,

“other times the alcohol,” and emptied it.

“Quite so.” I ordered another pair. “So, you had this kid.”

“Ah yes, the kid!”

“You know people idealise having one.” He looked up as he received the new glass. “It's all true,” another huge swallow.

“True?”

“Kid was great.”

“But?”

“Well, gotta pay with karma, isn't it?”

“There were downsides?”

“Downsides? Yes!” He laughed disconcertingly, “And it went all down!” He had a mad look in his eyes now.

“See, I had diaper duty.”

“The wife shed some sweat, blood and tears when the baby arrived,” now that I looked at them, they had that yellowing look,

“so I had to take care of it for a while.”

“Tough?”

“Formed a habit, I did.”

The new glasses arrived, he took both of them now.

“See, the little'un had this charming game when we changed diapers.”

“They often do.”

“Just finished cleaning up when ...”

He cackled delightedly,

“out came the rest.”

He considered the glass.

“Great way to check a babysitter's dedication, that was.”

“So, that habit?”

“Well, *I* wasn't going to be cleaning any more than needed.”

“You had a method for dealing with it?”

“Great one, changing diapers in the bathroom right next to the toilet.” He put the glass down. “No more of this,” he mumbled.

“Water!”



“Where was I?”

“Your method?”

“Ah yes. Baby who doesn't hold his poo, toilet right next.”

“I see ...”

“So the littl'bugger could have all the fun it wanted while I held it under its armpits,” he smiled triumphantly, “above the toilet.”

He looked happy for the first time that night. “Why didn't you like to be asked about your children?”

“You don't see?”

“No”

“Had to change diapers in the train one day.” He seemed almost sober now. “Here I was, on this old train, with my Genius Method.”

He eyed the beers. “Not a smooth ride, those old trains. Especially when they change tracks on you.”

“The shaking makes you drop what you're holding.”

He decided against taking the glass' offer.

“Did I tell you where those old trains' toilets drain to?”

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## Experiment

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“No, I will not participate in this experiment of yours!”

Henriette had finally run out of patience.

“But ...”

“No! I ain't going to risk my mind just to confirm how ridiculous your theories are.”

Henry looked disappointed. “They're not ridiculous.”

“On top of that,” she pointed at the mass of wires and metal plates, “that contraption looks about as safe as jumping off a cliff.”

Henry tried to answer that accusation, he had ensured everything was grounded.

“During a hurricane.”

“It's perfectly safe.”

Henriette stared significantly at the thick power cords going into his device.

Henry had the grace to look embarrassed. “Mostly safe,” he admitted.

“Why does it have to be a human subject?”

“I tried it with Terry already. He came out fine, but he can't tell me about what he sensed.”

“You put my dog in that contraption?” She put her hand protectively on the subject.

“Don't worry, he's not hurt at all.”

“That's the last time I bring him over.”

“But you can see that it's perfectly safe.”

“Oh, all right. I'll go in, but ...”

“Thank you, you won't regret it!”

“... don't blame me if I see nothing.”

“Sit over here, please.”

Henriette sat down in the seat. It was located in the middle of the detector.

“This sends the waves into your brain to interpret them.” Henry put a headband over her hair. “I've not been able to find an effective algorithm to deal with the information stream,” Henriette shifted a bit to get more comfortable, “but aiming it into your brain's occipital lobe should allow you to let it present you with a visual interpretation.”

“And if it doesn't?”

“According to my colleagues, the worst that can happen would be something similar to a drug-induced trip.”

“Ah well. I've gone through worse, I guess.”

“Ready?”

“No, but go ahead.”

Henry flipped the switch and controlled his machine. The machine began to hum. “Don't worry, that's just the detector warming up. You okay?”

Henriette didn't answer. She looked around as Henry examined the screen and adjusted his baby by typing some commands. The machine started following the movements of her head and eyes. Still, nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. She was looking at her dog when her eyes widened and her mouth dropped.

“What?”

“It's beautiful.”

“You see something?”

“It's like a bright golden light coming from the inside of him. Glowing through his fur!”

Henry was almost dancing by now. “Yes! I was right.”

“It's magnificent.”

“So, how does mine look?”

“You don't know that whatever it is I'm seeing is a s...” her head turned around until she fell silent.

“What?”

“Are you sure you want to know?”

“Tell me, I don't care if mine looks bad.”

“I see nothing. You don't seem to have one.”

Turning pale, he quickly flipped the power switch. Then they just sat there in the sudden quiet, not moving. The dog gave a short bark for attention, but the two of them ignored him and kept silent, lost in their own thoughts for a long time.

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## Nudge

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The Master was truly evil.

Not like the small fry, who would kill a few people for enjoyment or out of madness, or like some of the royals of those days, who would wage wars for esoteric reasons. No, the Master was a creative genius and that meant cruelty beyond measure.

Like their predecessors, the two dogs came from the same litter. The first year, the Master treated all with that firm kindness which the breed required. Despite the firmness, that was a good year for them. They grew up to be strong and loyal guard dogs, and they even loved their Master. However, strong and loyal was not all He required. On their first birthday, the Master took away their litter mates, and stopped feeding the two brothers for a few days. When their hunger reached a peak, he arrived in their room with a large chopping knife. Despite their empty bellies, the two remained disciplined, each giving a paw at a simple command. The Master tightly bound those paws before skilfully chopping them off. The pair would end their fasting with a taste of their brother's meat, followed by the other siblings for the rest of the week.

The Master watched them carefully after this. Evaluating. Judging. Were they ferocious enough? Did they remain loyal to him? Did the brothers' bond survive? Previous experiments had resulted in the dogs attacking either him or fighting each other to the death. But when it worked, the treatment's results were magnificent.

Slowly He relaxed His supervision. After a while they were trusted to guard the estate as the Master returned to His other evil doings. Though trespassers mostly seemed to consist of the local monkeys and the odd burglar. The last thing they would see was the mad gleam in the two dogs' eyes as they were ravaged methodically. The dogs never did enjoy their victims' meat, so results of their efforts would remain to keep away the smarter ones.

For the Master was working on his plot to gather power. He and His allies thought the plan solid, but it would not do to have even the slightest whisper of a rumour reach the ears of those who would have a the smallest of chances of hindering it. Scholars capable of devising counter measures, if they existed, would do so out of mere curiosity. A mental exercise even if they had no expectation of ever needing them. The Master knew that kind very well. No, that would not do at all.

One day, the Master made a serious error with his guards. The mistake was a small one. Indeed, the Master did not notice it Himself, his mind had been concentrated on other things. His frustration had been slowly building up at the failure of a key experiment, to the point of needing to vent. The dogs seemed convenient targets. Sentient. Truly satisfying to kick, in particular their heads.

After the incident, the dogs' madness seemed expanded. The master was so overjoyed with this that he did not notice the intelligence which slowly joined the mad gleam in their eyes. Where before the ravaging was spontaneous, now the dogs *knew* they were performing their master's wishes. They considered. *Reasoned.*

For years, all seemed to go well. The plot progressed. The brothers guarded. The master kept oblivious to the tiny crack in the dogs' loyalty. One day, what



seemed like a small girl appeared at the gates.

“Hello.”

A hostile growl answered.

“Got a message from a dove the other day.”

It turned questioning.

“Since I was in the neighbourhood any ways, I was asked to have a chat with you two.”

A surprised yelp.

“I don't know either.”

An incredulous grunt from the brother.

“When a dove brings a message, it's better not to ignore it,” a gentle scolding.

Back to growling from both of the dogs.

“Is he worth this loyalty, then?”

Silence answered her question.

“I thought so. Think it over, will you?”

For the next month the girl visited each morning, before sunrise, at the gate.

Each time, she was greeted by growls from the brothers, though they conversed extensively.

“You thought I was human? Finally got the smell right, then,” on one day.

“He did *what?*” was answered with a raised prosthetic paw as confirmation, another day.

“I did have some trouble forgetting to support the weight. That caused some problems on the stairs in the first inn I visited,” after a questioning bark, the next day.

At the last visit she asked, “Have you considered?”

Bark.

“Thank you. When you do decide, you'll know what to do.”

Both dogs barked the question at the same time.

“Thank you! You'll be welcome to join,” she smiled in answer. “I also enjoyed our chats.” She turned to leave. “I've asked for a dove to find you and tell you where you can join me, even if you decide not to help out.”

The two dogs watched her leave with damp eyes and folded ears. The year that followed was dreary, even in comparison to the previous ones. The master was preparing the finishing touches to his plot, so he didn't notice the change in his prized guardians, or even the improved smell of the gardens. The brothers, nowadays, kept chasing, but always managed to let their quarries escape with just a few flesh wounds and torn clothes to ensure their reputation remained

unscathed. Those few moments of fun, however, did little to console the gap they now noticed being in their hearts. If they were honest with themselves, they were even losing their enjoyment in the chase.

The master rarely left his estate. During one of those rare trips, to arrange the restocking of his depleted test subjects, the brothers entered the main mansion for the first time of their lives. They had never before even considered crossing the doormat, so the master had neglected to forbid them to do so. The door opened after a light push, the estate was well guarded, after all. The brothers sniffed, looked and listened for any activity inside the building. After a silent glance they split up. They had a huge building to cover in this scouting expedition.

They still had not decided what to do with the request, but their curiosity had been awakened. What was their master up to? What had solicited a divine nudge, even if only a slight one? They silently moved through the house in the following hours. When they were familiar with the layout they rejoined each other to smell a strange path left by their master, which disappeared into a blank wall. Silently, they sat for a while, next to one another, until one of them sniffed the air, tracing their master to one of the paintings on the left side. Standing against the wall on his hind legs, he pushed with his prosthetic. The mechanism activated, they could feel some rumbling through the wooden floor as the blank wall slid backwards and moved aside. The new corridor extended the one they were in, as if the moved wall never existed.

Onwards they moved. Their stealth was only interrupted by the taps of their legs hitting the luxurious wood. The corridor turned more silent and dark as they went further, branching out into a small labyrinth.

*Taptap*

A door, which smelled of strangers, over here.

*Taptap*

A trail of the mixed stranger-smell to the meat storage over there.

*Taptap*

A strange, dead, smell behind that other door around the corner. Not smelling like a dead thing, just ... death itself. They quickly passed that door.

*Taptap*

The door at the end of one of the corridors smelled strongest of the master. They studied it and its lock, sniffing and feeling with their noses. Aged wood and iron. They considered a while. *Is he worth this loyalty?*

Not really, but the master was the master. He had been the centre of their world and, so they had thought, would be so forever. *Is he worth this loyalty?*

Their eyes became clouds of madness. The master was the master, but had long ago ceased to be the Master. Still, they waited. Neither moving forwards, nor back to the only task they had ever known.

The brothers' ears perked up at a new thought. Both raised their prosthetics, claws extended. Sharper than the finest surgeon's glass and tougher than dragon's scales. They sliced and watched the door slowly tilt backwards.

“*Is he worth this loyalty?*”

The brothers passed over the fallen door. They each covered an opposite side of the study as they entered. Where the rest of the estate was luxurious, this room was strictly utilitarian. A stone fire place and a comfortable desk next to the window with a view on the gardens. Even the floor was changed to smooth, unpretentious, rock. And bookcases. Entire walls of bookshelves filled tightly with books. Both raised their noses as they started their search.

Something was off.

It began in the fireplace. A few embers remained glowing, or had they started to glow again? Slowly, as the brothers were sniffing out the bookshelves, the glow increased. The dogs noticed the smell and turned towards the fireplace as it started to crackle. Within the flames they could easily discern two glowing red spots. Embers? Meanwhile the room slowly filled with swirling, smoky smelling fumes. The brothers sat as they watched the elegantly swirling movement, their heads lightly drowsed by the smell.

*What, this, be?*

The two embers kept glowing brighter, the colour shifting, first, from red to white, then turning a pure, transparent but bright, blue.

*You, another foolish question, ask?*

The embers, flames and smoke had turned into a harmony, a single creature enveloping the two brothers, both stood as if hypnotised.

*You, him, be-not?*

They barked delightedly at this new experience. For the first time since losing the paw they moved as puppies. Playful and dancing. Jumping high, to nip at the swirls, or energetically moving the nose through the smoke to watch the trails.

*Happiness, miss.*

Another twin bark at that, as they quieted down.

*Leave, can-not. Him, I, bound.*

A growl.

*Him, hate!*

The temperature in the study rose a few notches at that.

*Evil! Hate! Hate! Hate!*

The entire room lit up with a flash.

Two alarmed yelps.

*Sorry. You-flame-be-not, forget.*

The flames dimmed at that. Large parts of the bright swirls turned into smoke.

A questioning bark.

*He, soul-I, steal. Room-dead, keep.*

Room-dead. There was only one place they knew that would fit that description. Bad news. Still, the brothers did not hesitate to move.

*You, search?*

Two barks answered as they exited the study.

They had the corridors' smells completely mapped on the way in, so they could effortlessly zero in on that door they had skipped so readily on their way in. The smell of true death, which is as much like that of days-long dead cadavers as the sun is to a blown out candle, is a smell one is unlikely to forget. Ancient mental mapping talents developed for a hunt on the plains eased the navigation of the labyrinth significantly. The door and lock were of a different material, black and smooth, but yielded to the brothers' slicing as easily as the wooden one. The door fell back with a loud bang. The dogs waited outside the pitch black entrance.

They sensed that this room was guarded, and guarded well. Something shifted in the darkness, making a rustling noise. Quills, like those of a porcupine, bristled. Cautiously, the dogs moved in to try to make out what was inside.

Out spewed a dark, thick liquid.

It was so foul, a skunk would have flinched. How could they have ever thought the earlier smell to be bad? The brothers flew backwards from the stink, their orientation completely skewed as their mental smell-maps were exorcised from existence. As they moved in opposite directions from that orifice hell would be proud of, a tentacle struck one of them, quills piercing the paw with the prosthetic to haul him in.

A cutting howl sounded as drops of the earlier splash entered flesh via those

needles. The other brother turned at that howl as it went on and on. Insanity returned to his eyes in full force, as he took aim at the source of the spiny tentacle. The howling continued to cut into his bones and mind. He took a leap, with gaping jaws.

Utter madness.

Another stream of that syrupy concoction stopped the dog in mid air, clogging his nose and stinging the inside of his mouth. And the tastes! Amplified arsenic, Serrano pepper, wasabi, salt and hydrochloric acid. Each of them was burning or stinging in their own characteristic manner, with on top of that, that horrid smell. It was solid enough to have turned into a flavour of its own. It hammered its way into the dog's mind. Emptied of all other thoughts, the dog ran forwards. Whether by accident or design, his path led straight into that dark doorway towards the source of his torture.

The tentacle reacted, smashing the other dog into the wall in an attempt to catch its attacker, then coiling inwards, leaving the suffering brother lying in the corridor. Too late. The dazed dog watched as his brother reached the creature proper. First bumping it off balance, then slashing with those sharp claws. The view was blocked by the spines. Judging from the highly pitched screams, the dog was gaining the upper paw. Now, the foul liquid flowed out as a river, and the pitch of the screams increased, but, suddenly, the tentacle gave a final twitch and fell. It spread waves in the liquid before the room behind that entrance turned quiet.

Struggling to shake off the pain, dizziness from the hit and the smell, the dog moved into the chamber. He muzzled his brother for a short while. Miraculously, he still had life left in him. After a quick lick, the dog moved past the owner of those spines, further into the dome shaped chamber, where a purple bead floated



in the centre. It seemed to swallow the surrounding light, creating a ring of absence around it. The brother daintily took it in his jaws, first gently pulling, but retrieving it with a jerk of his head when it didn't give. The dog stood a while, swaying on his legs as his world eventually stopped spiralling, fighting down his nausea.

The brother near the entrance opened his eyes, watching as the other dog stabilised himself. He gave a warning bark, too late, as two tentacles pulled down a loose stone at the top of the dome and smashed it down on the other dog's head in one move.

A short pause. The world appeared to wait for something momentous.

Then the calm was broken. First by a purple streak, flashing straight through the wall, its light reflecting throughout the chamber. Then by the dome caving in. The dog whimpered as he tried to leave, but got buried under the stones.

Silence.

Mangled, beaten, soaked. The dog could only wait for it to end.

Darkness.

Seconds took hours.

Cold.

Strength was failing.

*Soul-brother-you, save.*

A familiar presence.

*Mind-brother-you, most, lose.*

Warmth returned to his limbs.

*Leftover-him, save? We, price, pay?*

What price?

*Lifetime.*

No price at all, then.

*Agree.*

Oblivion turned into flames as the dog lost consciousness.

A single dog stood at the gate. Two prosthetic legs. Eyes that sometimes contained a transparent flickering, like that of a candle flame but blue. The fur had turned a dusty grey, like burned out coals, with hints of true blackness under that coat. He slashed a single time and pushed the gate, but turned around as it squeaked open. He regarded the estate with strangely gentle eyes, hardening as he fixed them on the mansion.

*Power-him, allow-not.*

A sense of agreement from his brother's leftover mind, close enough that it could be his own. Or was it? The eyes flashed a hot blue, then the dogs turned around

to walk through the gate.

Smoke billowed out of the windows as they walked into their new life. Perhaps they should seek out a certain dove ...

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## **Illegal Game**

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## ***Prologue***

It was, in the player's considered opinion, quite the experience. There's hunting *game* and there's *The Hunting Game*, and the latter was incomparable. He had scored 82 so far. A new record, he was sure. He still had a week to fully establish the high score to virtually unreachable levels. He would become a legend in the Hunting Scene. Still, you shouldn't celebrate a scalp before it was cut, so he had carefully checked his next target's habits. This one was a *bodyguard* in what was called a *syndicate* by some of the locals. Some kind of criminal organisation. He did not really care. What he did care about was that the man in question was armed and dangerous. This would be quite a challenge.

The game's difficulty had started quite low. Those *firemen*, *construction workers* and the like, were much too easy. The only problems they caused were by attracting the attention from the authorities. Luckily, the game moved him to a new city after each few kills. He didn't recall that feature being there before. The devs must have gotten complaints about the *police* being overpowered and put in a corrected mission structure in that last update. The targets quickly moved to harder ones, like *gang members*. People who led more violent lives, more alert, more trained and dangerous.

There was his target, he really should stop daydreaming. He checked his knife, cutting a small branch with its edge. Excellent. The *bodyguard* had just finished the routine checking of his car for trackers and explosives. The player quickly walked up to the car, cut the throat, and walked on. By now he knew by feel whether some extra action was required to complete the kill. Eighty-three. He relaxed as he walked up to his own car. Quite satisfying.

He frowned when he received the next target briefing. Another *bodyguard*? True, killing those only went so smooth thanks to his skill, but he had expected the

game to select a higher level enemy by now. What the hell did *presidential* mean? He read on, wondering again why the game used *paper* for the briefings. Even the natives used portable electronics by now. Weapon of choice: a *ricin pellet*? He could see that he had some more research to do.

## *Illegal Game*

Sleeth had celebrated its promotion with a good, long sleep in its comfortable nest. It had expended all its energy in reaching the Slothainian ideal state of a completely emptied mind, to better let in the dreams. Sleeth was about to start on its second helping of me-doree leaves, the mild narcotic its species used for exactly that purpose, when the room signalled the arrival of a priority call. The leaves were well on their way to Sleeth's mouth, neatly impaled on one of its claws. It kept them ascending slowly as it briefly considered ignoring the call. The lighting turned an alarming shade of lilac. The Slothainian sighed a long, deep, sigh. He had disabled autorun scripts for normal messages, which meant that ... “Sleeths,” this was a message from the central office.

“Sleeths, Contact has received a tip that a new species is being exploited at this very moment.” The captain still extended her s'. “Apparently, the chief caught it while browsing the new live stream channels.” Sleeth was not aware that the chief was into such things. “At first, it looked like one of those new virtual reality game streams, but rumours have been going around that you can strike out the *virtual* part in that description, as it were. You are hereby tasked with investigating *The Hunting Game*. By virtue of the authority vested in me as Representative of the Office of the Triumvirate, you are granted Class One privileges, to be used exclusively for investigating and judging all actors involved.” Class One meant no restrictions. It also meant a full personal report to the entire Triumvirate. How tiresome. “I know we are interrupting your holiday, Sleeths, but this cannot wait. When you see the recording of one of the streams, you will understand.” Sleeths jaws gaped in a lazy yawn as it signalled for the room to display the attached video.

The wall sprang to life, a mass of foliage curtained to display the moving images. Sleeth silently watched the bipedal alien preparing and using its knife to

efficiently slice into its victim. If this was the real deal, then it was, indeed, very serious. This sort of thing tends to spoil first contact and that did not even mention that this was obviously murder. It looked like the perpetrators would verily deserve their punishment for interrupting Sleeth's rest when it found them. Another huge yawn as it looked at the moss that had grown on its fur. First, though, Sleeth would need to visit the barber.

After a thorough grooming of its long fur, Sleeth felt it and its fur could handle just about anything the galaxy would throw at it. It was time to leave for the local Contact branch for a fresh outfit. This would be the first opportunity to use whatever The Triumvirate's Research and Engineering gave to Contact for a Class One. Good. It would save it from expending any more energy than strictly necessary.

The cab, basically, looked like a clothes rack on wheels. Instead of coats, there was a first class Contact agent dangling from the bar, firmly holding on, using the claws on all fours. Sleeth swung outwards when the cab took a turn, keeping its nose firmly pointed forwards. Unlike many of its compatriots, Sleeth loved to feel the strong breeze blowing through its fur. Sleeth imagined it to be quite an undignified sight, which may have had something to do with the others' professed dislike of windy conditions. The other advantage of this cab was that it could easily snake through the busy traffic, which contained a wide assortment of vehicles to accommodate the different species of The Triumvirate. From the little bowl-shaped carts for Itsumboes here, right up to a huge mobile aquarium for a Kujillian zooming past at break-fin speed. The cab easily evaded all to arrive well on time for its appointment at the lab. Sleeth crossed over to the branch favoured by most arboreal species, letting it rise majestically to the building's 26th floor before entering. It was, so Sleeth thought, a fine day to rest. Or would be, if there didn't happen to be a job which needed doing.



The team of Meercians was excited when he entered the meeting room. Meercians are almost always excited, moving on all fours, tails straight up in the air and chattering with their characteristic energy. Something to do with being small and growing up in a predator rich environment. One head raised itself. “Hey Sleeth, come over!” He blinked, looked around, then crossed over to hang nearby, head at the level of those of the gang. “So you're the one being sent to handle that nasty hunting business.”

“It's for real, then?” Sleeth inquired.

“Yesyes, definitely not VR, too flavourful for that.”

Many an experienced peruser of VR could distinguish a created world, or that of a game, from that of a recording of a real physical environment. Computer generated VR in The Triumvirate was good, the best known amongst the different known intelligences, in fact. It still was far from perfect, with its flaws obvious for most of those who could experience it. Sleeth itself got too nauseous with both to tell the difference. Of course, those hyperactive black-eyed, short furred, long nosed, little beasts got to enjoy it all, regardless of how artificial it was. They even enjoyed the more abstract stuff. “Absolutely horrible!” another one of the Meercians barked. Naturally, their sympathies would lie with the prey. “It's got to be stopped, and it's got to be stopped yesterday.” They all barked their agreements, and even Sleeth nodded at that.

“Any clues to where?”

“We got a good view of the star-scape from most streams.”

“And?”

“We have a star system,”

“Hit me.”

“It's close to the Empire.” One of the gang directed the meeting room to display a map of their common border. “Over there,” she pointed to the purple mark.

Sleeth considered in silence for a while. “You know what that means don't you?”

The mob looked confused until Sleeth clarified, “Everything related to this is now classified to an *even-if-you-need-to-know-you-won't*.” It silenced the protests before they even started. “Not even the Triumvirates get to hear about this until my official report.” Sleeth would need to move fast before the Empire claimed this new species' world “for their protection”. “I won't depend on them not knowing about it until it's too late, but ...” it pierced the team with a sharp glance, “... we, most certainly, should not help the Empire find out before.”

This new species' location meant that they would either have to get on track to be incorporated into The Triumvirate or gobbled up by the Empire. Sleeth intended to make sure they would get the time to have a say in whichever outcome they got. On top of that, it needed to tiptoe around that new touchy foreign minister of theirs. It would not be the first, or the last, war sparked by the fight over a species' future. This job was getting more interesting by the minute. Sleeth glanced at the excited faces. Oh dear.

“I will also require,” it put it delicately, “that this entire research team,” meaning every single last one of these gossipers, “will join me in the expedition to prepare for this species' first contact.” That should keep them silent for long enough. Big stunned eyes answered this pronouncement. Great. Now Sleeth would have to endure their hyperactivity.

Sleeth considered the message it would leave behind. The disappearance of one of The Triumvirate's foremost research and development teams might cause some consternation. Sleeth had better make it clear that they were not kidnapped or such.

“Record, please.” The room sprang to life. “Captain, Sorry to be borrowing team thirteen. I promise to return all of them in one piece.” Sleeth displayed one of its slow smiles. “Most of them, anyway.”

That should do the trick. “Send message.”

They were in orbit around the natives' star.

Sleeth's new personal team had done an admirable job outfitting the expedition with their gadgets and taping together an excellent experimental hull with the latest in battle analysers, cannons and launch tubes. During the preparations they had all moved to one of the “abandoned” wharves, despite them being a public secret. Security was top-notch and they could easily be mistaken for yet another one of the many “black” research projects.

Hidden in plain sight.

Sleeth had also taken along some of that excellent security. No point in leaving behind the risk for accidental leaks. The researchers had monitored the comments on the hunting streams. It seemed that word of the reality of those streams had gone out, though the consensus seemed to be that they were mis-en-scènes. Sleeth had made sure to have those rumours reinforced before they left.

The star was fairly unremarkable. The admiral he had grabbed along still had not lost his air of disapproval, though Sleeth suspected his Ursian bellows were more out of habit by now. The admiral had always performed his job perfectly before and he seemed genuinely interested by now.

“What are the locals like?”

One of the gang answered, “Barely space faring. They seem to be using radio waves for much of their communications.”

“Messy radio waves.”

“Omnidirectional.”

“Wasteful,” Sleeth commented.

“Tell them, not us,” answered the admiral.

“I'd better not.” Sleeth examined the image of the home world. “In all our experience with newly contacted species,” he rotated it to study the social map, “Contact has yet to find one that doesn't get touchy at comments on how they're running things.”

“There.” Another one from the mob pointed at the continent. “The latest streams seem to originate from there.”

“How do you know?” A curious admiral.

“Day-night patterns, local architecture, comparing them to those messy broadcasts of theirs.”

“Doesn't really matter.” Sleeth ordered, “Find the relay station they're likely to be using.”

Aye's answered it from different directions. That gang had taken a fancy to some of the sailors' language, though they skipped most of the formalities.

It took a while, but they found it, and something else.

“A fleet, are you sure?”

“Eleven ships, yes. We have visual confirmation.”

“What!” The admiral exclaimed, “Are you crazy?”

“Don't worry.” The Meercian winked, “We put a bit of special sauce in the drone's stealth systems.” “Almost bumped into them, they did,” chuckled another, “Luckily the AI wasn't taking a nap at the time.” A third one added, “They're frigates.”

The admiral looked suitably impressed, but his expression changed. “It seems,” he looked very disappointed, “that we're going to need reinforcements if we want to catch them.”

“Are we?” Sleeth disagreed.

The admirals eyes widened at that.

“Any markings?” The question was directed to the research gang. The answer was prompt. “Only the streamers' branding.”

An incredulous “You can see those?” from the admiral was answered with, “Mentioned almost bumping into them, didn't I?”

“Didn't think you meant it literally.” Good Ursian, that admiral. He took the Meercians' non-military lack of discipline in stride.

Which still left the problem of dealing with that little fleet. “Admiral, you forget what sort of beings we're dealing with here, hence ...”

The admiral started a scary grin at that.

“... you are authorised to include *lethal* force in the options for dealing with them.”

A very scary grin. The Meercians all stopped chattering and retreated a step.

The admiral turned to Sleeth. “So it's time to take out the experimentals. You said you great faith in overkill?”

This resulted in a bridge full of excited Meercians. It was not often that they got to directly experience the results of their work. The chattering increased as they found that they could not deny a certain *nervousness*, now that their own lives depended on their marvels working properly.

“Launch.”

They all felt the recoil from the launches. “Move us in.” Not much else to do, after all. “If the drones could bump into those ships,” again that feeling of almost taking a jump backwards, “without them noticing, let's test how close we can get.” Some more recoil. “Prepare for boarding, Sergeant,” at one of the screens. Another smooth interruption of the ship's acceleration. “Though I suspect,” and another, “that the preparation may be,” and another, “superfluous.” He got answering grins all around as those launches kept their pace.

The Triumvirate could, as of yet, not mass produce those specially stealthed torpedoes. When they could, they would shift the power balance in their corner of the galaxy for a while. A short while, Sleeth suspected as he studied that cloud moving on the display. The competition likely had something equally nasty in the works to balance things out.

Preparing for boarding was, indeed, superfluous for those ships.

The base itself surrendered immediately. When it was secured the research mob joined Sleeth to get a good look inside. They chattered quietly as they examined the cabins. Each held an unconscious being.

“Report.”

“We've been monitoring these beings' mind activity.”

“And?”

“The minds in there are not native to those bodies.”

“Explain.”

“The minds are all from the same species. These bodies are not.”

“You mean?”

“They have swapped minds with the locals for their sick games.”

The admiral asked, “How is that possible?”

“We haven't got a clue.”

He looked horrified. “Can't you swap them back?”

“Nope.”

Sleeth interjected, “They're not likely to thank us if we did.” He looked cheerful.



One from the gang agreed, “As far as the natives are concerned, these are all criminals of the worst kind.”

Much better to leave them as is.

“Take them all.” Sleeth looked around. “They’ll have to build new lives.”

As for the minds swapped down to the planet ... who cared?

## *Epilogue*

Well, that went worse than expected.

He didn't even get a chance to implement the planning for this new target. Somehow, his searches in the *library* must have triggered an alarm. There was a team of grim natives in his room now. Did they have to be so rough? Those kicks were really unnecessary, and that gun against his head really hurt! Ah, well. At least he had his high score to celebrate.

Any minute now, the game would return him to his own body.

*Any minute now ...*

###

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## Justice

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Her earliest memories were of still being encapsulated in her egg. Her mother's and, later, her aunt's quiet whispers and the heat from their bodies provided constant comfort. Sometimes she would shift. Always, an inquiring hiss would come from the Outside. Enveloped by the security of being cared for, she would calm down and doze off to the whispers of her family.

A big change was coming, her mother's recent whispers warned. She could not quite figure out their precise meaning, but she understood that these warnings from the Outside also contained encouragements. It was going to be scary, but safe.

Scratches on the shell. Something new. Instead of the dim glow of light coming through the shell, a sudden line of brightness appeared. Surprised, she poked at it with her snout, creating a bigger gap. She quickly retreated back into her shell.

The Outside was not encouraging.

Two monstrously scaly heads were looking back at her. Each of them was rimmed with horns. Big teeth were visible even when their jaws were closed. And those eyes! Dark, dark red eyes were staring right into her soul.

Then one of them hissed in delight.

Relief. Everything was safe. Mommy was here.

Mommy was *smart*. That was the only rational explanation. Every time she hid, whether in the lab, the dreaming hall, or the treasure room, her mother would find her for her lessons.

“Come out from under that pile, dear. That shade of gold doesn't really match your green scales.”

“Classes before bedtime!”

“Ah, there you are. Let's start today's lesson.”

Aunty, when she visited, worried that she wasn't learning fast enough.

“Oh, don't worry. She's just learning an extra skill,” Mommy would say. “She actually enjoys the other classes, once they do get started.” She winked. “Why don't you teach her that hiding spell of yours?”

Yes, Mommy definitely was smart.

Aunty taught history, about the Great Treaty and how humans and dragons managed their relations in the Council during those millennia. She also had some choice words to say about how the current one handled things.

“Humans are starting to encroach on dragon territory, skirting dangerously close to breaking the Treaty.”

“Only the criminals, and they have been dealt with appropriately by their leaders.”

Aunty conceded the point with the flick of a talon. “Still, it is only a matter of time before some dragons are going to take matters in their own claws.”

“Now, that would be breaking treaties.”

“Just you wait,” warned Aunty, “If dragons don't get to deal with them directly, one of these fools is going to make a fatal mistake.”

They got back to the lesson after that. Confused as she was by it, the child would remember this discussion very well.

Shortly after, she discovered the marvels of flight. After Mommy had taught the basics, she was left to her own devices for a while. The freedom! The exhilaration of a high speed hunting dive, levelling the flight just in time and seeing the ground speeding below her. The open sky, the view from high altitude. Then, back to classes.

Wizardry, alchemy, mathematics, administration, influence, history and geography, to name but a few of the subjects.

“You haven't got the smell quite right, dear.”

“Better keep the potassium away from that drink.”

“You still have to prove that temporary assumption, my Little Talon.”

“If the figures keep not adding up, get someone else to help check each entry. You read each entry out loud, I'll check them against my list.”

“Council member Blueheart managed to smooth things over with the

ambassador by discovering their common love of fishing. Sometimes, *personal* relations can trump the most skilled of power plays.”

“Don't look at me like that, o yea of little faith. I promise you I will demonstrate that continents drift.”

Over the next few decades it seemed to the youngster that education was being poured into her like wine in a barrel, sometimes overflowing to be lost to her until her patient mother and aunt poured it right back in.

Until that day.

Mommy stood fixed, like a statue. The young dragon was wondering what her mother was doing when the head swung around towards her. “Hide in the kitchen, Little Talon.” Something in her mother's bearing stopped all protest before she even voiced them. “Don't get out, whatever happens.” The young dragon moved into the kitchen, “Take care, love,” behind a stack of cooking implements, huge skewers for cooking entire cows. She started waiting for whatever it was that her mother was preparing for. Silence, full of anticipation emanating from her mother in the main hall of their cave.

It was huge.

Despite the minute instant that she could sense the attack, she felt that the cave should, by all rights, be shaking itself apart. Perversely, a light breeze and a low moan coming from her mother in the hall were all the physical signs of the blow. Ludicrous.

Silence.

After a while, some clamour from the entrance.

“Treasure room!”

“Skip it, that's not what we're here for.”

“Lab here!”

“Let me check, careful now.”

A human appeared at the entrance. The youngster held her breath as it gave the room a good look-over.

“This is the kitchen. Not going to find much of use here. Except, wait ...”

A pair eyes stared in the direction of the stack of huge skewers a while.

“What is it?” From the hall.

She started to feel cold shivers dancing down her spine, but, to her relief, that cloaked figure seemed to decide against taking them.

“Nothing. Find me that lab!”

He moved out. She slowly started breathing again.

After a while the rumour died down. Even when the silence got unbearable, she kept herself hidden. Until she had a sudden thought.

*Mommy?*

Slowly, she came out from amongst the skewers. Cautiously, she moved her snout through the doorway, just enough to see the mangled body of her mother.

She did not remember much of what happen after that. Screams calling for her mother to return. Laying her head on what they had left of the huge snout. Teeth and horns had been removed. And blessed oblivion, until awaking in a strange nest with her emotions numbed by grief.

Two dragons were waiting for her, attentive. Aunty and a stranger, blue at the chest, the colour radiating like vines into his red body. *Unusual*, she thought dispassionately. “We came the moment we detected something was amiss, Little Talon,” her aunt said. The other dragon snorted, “My head is still ringing from that bang.”

“Council member Blueheart?”

They stared back at her. Her aunt glanced at the other, “That answers your question, doesn't it? Her mind is fully returned and functioning.” Blueheart looked embarrassed as she continued, “Told you this Little Talon would surprise you.”

“Yes, and you were right, again.”

“So, are we finally going to take action?”

“No.”

She stared incredulously at the councillor's impassive face.



“As before, we will trust their leaders in this.”

“After all that destruction?” Her aunt turned back towards the youngster, “That attack was an order of magnitude more powerful than the previous incursions. Several orders, to be more correct.” She glared back to the blue-red dragon. “You saw that devastation around the cave. Nothing, not even the scorpions and cockroaches, survived for *miles*,” she was almost screaming, “and you propose to leave it unanswered?”

The target of her fury remained impassive, “Not unanswered. We merely delegate the answer to the proper authorities, as we're supposed to.”

Her aunt started a furious retort at that, but he interfered, “And you will abide by this decision.”

She stared back speechlessly. “We are keeping a close watch on you to ensure that you do.”

“Excuse me, may I come in?” The three dragons swerved their heads towards the single man, who entered without waiting for an answer. “I couldn't help but overhearing. The Aithian Kingdoms are extremely grateful that, despite this blatant provocation, the dragon members of the Council have decided to leave matters in human hands,” he looked around, “and even, in their wisdom, prevented unilateral action by some of its more, ah, independent members.” He looked straight at an angry Aunty as he emphasised the next sentence, “We can see that they have left *no* oversight in preventing any unfortunate retaliations.”

Then he winked at the young one.

Comprehension dawned in her Aunt's eyes as the ambassador left. “You knew he

was listening,” she accused.

“Knew that fishing is the greatest sport known to both dragons and humans,” Blueheart mumbled to himself.

The younger dragon still felt strangely numb as she asked, “Did he,” the two dragons looked at the Little Talon, “just carefully not say what I thought he didn't?”

“Yes,” her aunt answered, “and you can stop congratulating yourself now,” she told the councillor irritably.

A few months later. The youngster entered the town with her pony behind her, a gift from the ambassador. “Enjoy this delicious morsel,” he had joked. She had laughed at that for the first time since that horrible day. He had been delighted he had finally succeeded in bringing a smile to her face. The gift still was a bit skittish, so she hadn't even tried to ride on it yet. She sighed. One of these days she would get her smell right. She tossed a coin to the stable boy.

“Give him an apple or two, please.”

“Yes ma'am.”

She entered the inn proper, taking a good look around the first human dwelling she had seen the insides of. Cosy. The innkeeper turned around. After a double-take, “Why hello, little girl. A room?” Aunty's spell held up magnificently, even under closer human scrutiny. Luckily, humans' noses were not quite up to detecting the differences she hadn't quite gotten right. The ones she had met so far, at least.

“Yes, please. Do you have one available with a view?”

The innkeeper promptly answered, as if she dealt with young, unaccompanied, children every day, “I have one on the third floor, if you like.”

“That'd be nice, yes.”

“You can pay?”

She lifted her purse in answer.

“Good.” Then the innkeeper asked, “What do I call you?”

She had considered the question of a human name since before she left home. She could hardly use a dragon one in these lands. Besides, the ones her mother called her by still hurt too much.

“You can call me Justice.”

###

## Decision

It had been an interesting month. First, those mysterious explosions out in space. Then there had been that strange case of that mass murderer who wanted to target the President getting caught. To top it all off, humanity had finally made contact. To be more precise, contact had been made with humanity.

I was staring at the TV. I still couldn't believe it. "That," I asked, "is our alien?"

Luckily we had our protocols prepared. Love those protocols, make sure you don't get blamed when anything goes wrong. Protocol called for at least one exobiologist advisor for every senior member in government. As Secretary of State, I got stuck with one of the better ones. She looked as dumbfounded as I felt.

"It seems to resemble a sloth," was her answer. Can you believe it?

Wasn't that just great? At this most momentous event in the history of mankind, me being one of the people most responsible for our side of it, I get to discover that the supposed expert they sent me is winging it along, too.

The recording of the conversation between that alien and the President ended. "So we're going to be the ones to handle negotiations?" Seemed the President had gotten cold feet and neatly delegated responsibility down the ladder.

"Except that the alien seems to prefer the term *conversation*," she looked

thoughtful.

“What?”

“Well, if the shape is an indication of the character of the creature, it would dislike hard work.”

“Isn't that a rather dangerous assumption to make?”

“It is, so consider this only as a possibility. Conversations are supposed to be more relaxing, *negotiations* are hard work.”

Maybe not such a bad expert after all.

The being called itself a Slothainian and it wasn't the only alien species. Naturally, I didn't get any warning about that before our first conference call.

“Greetings, I am Sleeth, agent of Contact from The Triumvirate.” A bunch of different aliens was just hanging there in the background. Some of those shapes were similar to meerkats, and I even saw something that looked damn close to a bear.

“You may consider me to be an ambassador plenipotentiary.”

I tried to get a word in, but that sloth just kept going. I saw on the other screens that all representatives had perked up at its words. Except for the Russian. He was stifling a laugh.

“Normally, it is the Triumvirate's policy to allow a newly discovered species to adapt to their new situation. However.”

It gave a sign to one of those meerkats behind it, was it actually chattering?

“This,” his image was replaced by that of a mass of stars, one of them flashing a bright purple, “is a map of your neighbourhood.” Two areas turned into transparent blobs of red and green. “Your neighbours are,” the red blob flashed, “the Empire of the Virtuous and,” now the green one, “The Triumvirate.”

That sloth waited as many of the representatives consulted their advisers. I also leaned to that exobiologist, “Is what he's saying credible?”

“Interesting, isn't it? It seems that there'll be two huge power blocks competing for our attention.” She considered. “Depending on what kind, that could be either good or bad.”

“You did hear it say Empire, didn't you? Don't like the sound of that.”

“Doesn't mean anything, could be translation error, or even propaganda.”

The Chinese representative asked a question. Those aliens had offered to provide live translations. Of course, we turned down that offer. We had to borrow a few translators from the UN, but we managed to handle it by ourselves. In this situation, as even the exobiologist agreed, a mix of pride and paranoia is a healthy response.

“Would the ambassador care to explain why there is no representative of this empire present?”

Excellent diplomacy, that was. In other, less polite words, the representative was demanding the presence of what looked to be a major competitor to this

Triumvirate of theirs. Competition, after all, would improve the quality of what they had on offer.

“That will become clear in a moment.”

It seems that this Sleeth either didn't understand diplomatic language or simply chose to ignore it. I sighed. It seemed I would have to take the risk after all.

“That will not be satisfactory. The United States will not be steam rolled into a decision. We formally notify you that we will stop participating in these negotiations until a representative from this empire arrives.”

The other representatives fell silent at that. Bunch of cowards.

That Slothainian, however, was unperturbed.

“These are not negotiations. We are simply conversing about the current interstellar relations.”

I shot an angry look at my advisor.

“You are, of course, free to stop it any time you like. However, the information I would like to give you will either be conveyed here or through a public broadcast.”

This sloth was doing a fine job, even when *conversing*. On top of that, the Russian was openly laughing at me now. So were the South African and French representatives.

I forced myself silent as Sleeth continued.

“The representative from the Empire of the Virtuous will arrive soon enough.” I swear that I saw those meerkats in the background high-fiving each other.

“The Empire's nature is such that it will be impossible for you to remain neutral.” Yes, definite high fives, even that bear was participating. Where did they learn that?

“As such The Triumvirate will offer you,” the bear moved to the Slothainian's side, “a full year's naval protection from the admiral here,” it seemed to be standing at attention, “to allow you to decide whether you would prefer to be a subject race of the Empire or part of The Triumvirate.”

The press was having a field day.

Recordings of our conversation had leaked out. Naturally, they had some choice cartoons about dealing with sloths. I rather liked many of those caricatures, except when they featured myself. Quiet a few of the editorials concluded that we should have gone for the Empire on principle. Idiots. Getting offered “protection” was not a very good deal, but, at least on paper, the Triumvirate's offer was non-binding. Whether or not this was intended for home consumption was yet to be seen, of course. Still, better check what the other side is offering before accepting either offer. Especially with the future of the human race on the balance.

Of course, no one cared once they saw the transmission from the Empire. No one even remembered what their ambassador had to say.

As you know, the decision was unanimously taken in a public vote at the UN. Everyone agreed. No protests. No complaints of undemocratic decision making.



Nothing. Not even from the newspapers. We would accept protection from The Triumvirate, and are likely to join it at the earliest convenience. The first images of that huge tarantula have sealed that outcome firmly.

###

## Arnennian-style Gryphon Wing

**being this week's recipe column by our Master Cook, Fiorentina Gourmé.**

*Editor's note: This article has been provided for illustrative purposes only.*

*Members of our esteemed readership attempt this recipe at their own risk.*

*Neither Ms. Gourmé nor any employee of our news sheet can be held responsible for any mishaps that may occur due to aforementioned attempt.*

There has recently been an increasing trend, amongst the burghers of our town, to use farmed Gryphons in their dishes. Whilst I wholeheartedly agree with my fellow professional restaurateurs that these over bred pieces of meat cannot compare to the bold flavours of the wild caught Arnennian Wild Gryphon, one must admit that, whether due to high demand or to the many dangers in acquiring such a delicacy, the price of this royal meat has made it prohibitive to eat but at the most distinguished of occasions. So rare has this meal become, that I fear that many cooks, both professional and at the home kitchen, have forgotten how to properly treat this meat. It is for this reason that I have, at great cost, designed the following recipe. Its greatest advantages are in its simplicity and in retaining the great gryphon flavours. I sincerely hope that those, who find themselves cooking wild gryphon for their first time, can put my humble contribution to good use.

The flavours I introduce in this dish should, when using the wild gryphon, emphasise its distinctive taste, but still provide the much needed support when using the farmed specimen. The Arnennian hunter's way of preparing the meat should also prevent its less wholesome properties from affecting any guest's humours negatively. I should like to very greatly impress upon the reader the importance of not skipping the long cooking time, lest the host become the victim to retaliatory actions of angered relatives and friends of the deceased, or arrested and tried for murder. I also recommend that the cook, despite the inconvenience, ask their supplier to not withhold the wing's claws as they are highly prized by makers of custom cutlery due to their native sharpness.

Attentive readers may notice that I have left out the traditional flambé: I have found that, if the timing is not entirely correct, the flambé tends to spoil the dish with an unpleasant bitterness.

**Ingredients:**

One gryphon wing, preferably from a fully grown wild Arnennian

Two buckets of vegetable oil, it is important that this not be animal fat

One bucket of salty Lathay bean sauce, please ensure that it is not the sweet kind

One bucket of sweet Arnennian rice wine, the genuine wine with the high alcohol content

3 jugs of sheeshan seeds

One jug of sugar

One jug of crushed Lodecan black pepper, of the most spicy category

**Preparation:**

If the claws have not been removed yet, cut them off, making sure to hold them with a pair of pliers and to wear gloves. The gloves will protect from accidental drips of the venom from the claws. Depose the claws in boiling water. They should be safe to store after they have been boiling for one entire day.

Rub the oil into the wing, it is preferable to have an assistant do this, if possible. Roast the wing entire, taking care to collect the juices. Each hour, rotate the wing a half turn and drip the juices back on. Total roasting time is **at least** sixty hours. Let the meat rest for one hour.

Mix the other ingredients until the sugar has been dissolved. Cut the meat into chunks and fill as many bowls as needed for the task. Pour over the sauce, ensuring that all pieces are well covered. Cover the bowls with cloth and guard well until ready to serve.

This dish goes excellent with rice, as well as mashed potatoes, but no vegetables are suitable accompaniment. Gryphon meat pairs well with any red wine that is high in tannin.

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## My Friend is an Otaku

“My friend is a bit strange.

Really. I think that's the term, otaku. But that's putting it mildly. He had an honest-to-god full scale model of a *gundam* in his front yard. You don't know what a gundam is? I don't blame you. Check on the internet, the Japanese animation series is quite popular. A gundam is a ludicrously 20 meters tall mecha, a giant fighting robot. Most people are happy with a model in the centimetres, my friend just had to have a full scale one.

You know trekkies? Those people that know every “p” and “q” of the technical discussions in any episode of Star Trek one can think of? If my friend had been a trekkie we'd have photon defences and an Enterprise by now. Well, a good full scale model of them. That's the kind of fan we're talking about. Only, the difference is that he's a fan of Japanese animation, what we call an *otaku*.

I asked him what the hell he was doing with that giant hunk of metal. His house might have been in the middle of nowhere, but, one of these days, that conspicuous monstrosity would catch someone's attention, wouldn't it? Somehow, I thought that he didn't have his permits in order. You know what he answered?

“Who cares? Gotta be prepared for when Godzilla arrives.”

Godzilla!

So, back to what happened. My friend had this favourite shop that sells all that foreign stuff, you know? Graphic novels, manga, merchandising, little statues, weird toys. You name it, they had it, and they were very discrete. I say his favourite, but it was the single one in the area. His only other alternative was shopping on the net. He hates that. Apparently he got burnt by buying fakes a few too many times.

There was this special edition figurine that was going to be released. Don't ask me what it was called. Even if I remembered, I've never been able to pronounce the name. Like any good special edition from that company, it was going to be pre-order only. He couldn't stop talking about it for months. I got really tired hearing of it. He made sure that he would get one, he did. Reserved one at that shop. Just to be sure, he also ordered from two different sites in Japan. He would have ordered more, but there was just the two places that shipped to the outside of Japan, and they all had a limit of one per customer. Yes, I know I said he despises ordering via the internet. He made an exception for this model. That's how much he wanted it.

Well, that model was very popular. So much so, that one shipment got stolen within Japan itself. The company was very apologetic. Due to the exclusivity of the figurine, they were not able to find replacements, of course we'll refund you, very sorry, thank you for your business. The other company never answered after getting the money. Turns out that one wasn't even located in Japan. Still, he wasn't worried too much. This just meant he'd have to wait a few weeks longer. His friendly neighbourhood shop would come through, right?

Wrong! New laws interfered. As you probably know, imports of that kind of figurine are no longer allowed. I'm sure you can imagine why. No special edition model for my friend. He was *very* disappointed.

You seem impatient, officer ... you don't see what that's got to do with this trail of destruction?”

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## Missing

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*Teleprompter script recovered from the archives of the Earth Dimension Public TV.*

Good evening. This is a message from the police. The Trans-dimensional Service requests your attention for the following.

On the night between February the twenty-ninth and March the first, Houhnahara the House Ghost went missing after visiting family in the Other Dimension. He was last seen at eight o'clock in the evening of that night by his parents, when he entered the spiritual highway in the direction of our plane. The Trans-dimensional Service suspects that a crime may be involved.

Houhnahara is a purple Ghostly Spirit of average aural intensity, but can be identified by his distinctive red spots. At the time, Houhnahara was wearing a silver coloured halo made by “Triccia's Halobright”, generic blue jeans with a black, leather belt, and a red ethereal jacket of the brand “Starry Skies”. He was also carrying the following objects of power: three talismans of the type “O-fuda4afterlife”, one imitation hammer amulet of the “Thor”-brand, and a white rabbit's foot.

The Trans-dimensional Service would like to know the answers to the following questions:

Has anyone seen Houhnahara the House Ghost, or anyone resembling him, since

eight o'clock in the evening of February the twenty-ninth, or does anyone know of his whereabouts since?

Has anyone detected anything suspicious on the spiritual highway on that night? In particular, the Service would like to know of any unusual happenings in the direction of our dimension.

Has anyone found Houhnahara's halo, his attirements, or his objects of power, or located them?

We ask that members of the public who may know what happened to him not take action by themselves, but contact the Trans-dimensional Service at:

0800-969-696.

I repeat: 0800-969-696.

But, of course, you can also call you local spiritual police department.

We thank you for your attention.

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## **Fleet Manoeuvres**

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“I still do not understand how you managed to threaten them into this treaty, Contact agent, but I intend to find out and deal with it.” Despite their breathy voice, Thanstrztraxiaa managed to convey anger. “Don't think that the Triumvirate can get away with annexing this species. The Virtuous are keeping our eyes on you.”

Sleeth sighed. Of all the beings that could have been sent ...

“I assure you, Minister, that we have issued not a single threat to these humans.”

“These creatures are not even responding to my direct hails. Don't tell me you had no claws in that!”

“Neither me, nor any other representative from The Triumvirate has forced them into any decision. They merely took our offer. As you have seen personally, we did not even have our fleet within anything resembling detection range of their planet. Your range, not theirs.”

The foreign minister broke the connection. Good. Contact agent of The Triumvirate Sleeth needed a nap. Unfortunately, he was interrupted again, this time by his own team of hyperactive researchers. They bounced into his cabin.

“It's confirmed, it's confirmed!”

Sleeth stifled a yawn. “They do have that particular profile? Will you stop that?”

Two of the Meercians, having become great fans of the earth gesture, stopped raising their paws. They still had to learn not to overdo it.

“It's as we suspected during your conversation with their representatives. The admiral agrees. A huge portion of the population has the proper psychology for it. In some aspects, remarkably close to Slothainians, in fact.”

Sleeth uttered something unmentionable.

“So far, that ship over there has not monitored their current broadcast. It'll not be long until they correct that oversight. How's their psycholginomics?”

“As good as ours,” the Meercian answered.

Sleeth repeated the something.

“Language.” The admiral stood at the entrance. “So, how likely is it that they are going to test our commitment?”

Sleeth answered, “You saw their minister's mood, what do you think?”

The Ursian started to open his mouth.

“No, don't answer. That question was rhetorical.” Sleeth considered further. “Admiral.”

The one spoken to cocked an eye.

“I fear that about a third of that magnificent fleet you left behind in orbit at Hrozin is going to need repairs.”

The admiral widened his eyes. “You think they'll send all they've got in the area?”

“Did you see the same arachnid as I did?”

“It's still going to operate with the restrictions from the Empire.”

“As a minister, it can afford to act first, apologise later. Especially when said act has the potential to remove such a boon from our side. On top of that, I don't think they care.”

“How are you going to justify taking that massive fleet from the triumvirates?”

“What holds for Ministers of the Empire, can also be said for Agents of Contact.”

Sleeth gaped its slow yawn again. “Besides, I'd enjoy the rest. Could you get this can moving back to the prefectural admiralty?”

“Aye.”

Behind the Ursian, the mob of researchers was discussing things.

“See? He's following the same psychological pattern as that Secretary of State from that continent down on that planet.”

“It's, like, spooky action at a distance, I say.”

“Doesn't want to, still goes ahead any ways. With its own head on the block, if necessary.”

“Excellent recruiting material.”

The admiral had already left, the gang was starting their new hobby again.

“I hate to interrupt, but I need my rest.”

“Ayes,” all around.

Sleeth was moving to its nest in the next cabin when the Meercian team speeded out.

Back in orbit at the prefecture's capital planet. The agent and the admiral were floating companionably next to each other, behind a transparent section of the hull. They had an excellent view of the planet and its star.

“If The Empire is sending all it's got to this Earth,” the Ursian mused.

The Slothainian opened its eyes, using a claw to move parts of its fur to the side.

“That leaves The Empire wide open.”

“Tempting. Risky.”

“So is what you're proposing to do.”

“Except that, if I happen to be wrong in my assessment ...”

The admiral snorted, “Hah!”

“It's a slim chance, I'll admit. But something unexpected could happen.”

“Like?”

“The emperor's interference.”

“You believe that?”

“Not really. However, there is a more pressing reason not to nibble at the Empire.”

“And that is?”

“As far as I am aware, our policy is not expansionist.”

“Attack is the best form of defence.”

“Don't you quote ancient Ursian sayings at me.”

The admiral smiled. “It's not, I recently acquired that wisdom from those humans.”

“As I was saying, my job is to handle contact.” The Slothainian continued. “If the Triumvirate had decided to invade anyone,” Sleeth closed the eyes again, stretching its neck so its face gathered more of the star's warmth, “even in response to a potential attack, they'd have handed the task of dealing with this to you. For now, we must *prevent* hostilities.”

The Ursian admiral had to be left behind. He would do well enough in a fleet engagement, but his voice was even better suited as a lightning rod for all the attention. A massive administrative error had deprived him of a part of his fleet. Over a hundred ships had been “sent back to the Triumvirate's capital for maintenance and repairs.” The admiral's wrath impressed the populace immensely. More suspicious ears would also be able to hear about the admiral's bellows about that “dictatorial agent from Contact who had taken all those ships for reasons of its own.” Those bellows were loud enough, that some of those ears may have been able to hear them directly. In reality, with the remaining ships' electronic warfare capabilities covering for their absence, five hundred capital ships and their support, a full third of his fleet, had been detached. The ships themselves only received their final orders from sealed messages when they were well on their way to home fleet.

The new admiral that went with them fit in even better than the Ursian. Praidos were just about as hyperactive as Meercians, so she was high fiving like the rest of them in no time after her arrival in Earth orbit. She also asked a question everyone had forgotten to ask.

“What about the species with the mind-swapping technology?”

The gang and Sleeth all said an invective.

The Praidos looked impressed.

“Never mind, we messed up. *I* messed up,” Sleeth looked angry.

“It isn't as if you had nothing else to worry about.”

“No excuse, that technology could be just as disruptive to the power distribution as the presence of these humans. I was already stretching the limits of my privileges in acquiring your fleet to protect this new species.”

The Praidos smiled. “You didn't. My orders are from the *admiralty*, not Contact.”

Good Ursian, that admiral.

“Still, I forgot we still have to follow up on that species. It's not often that we get discovered without us finding out about it.”

“You're sure it's a new species?”

One from the research mob, very much subdued, answered, “Has to be. Those devices match no known technological lineage, including from The Empire.”

“What's done is done.” Sleeth concluded, “For now, we have this other problem to deal with.”

They turned to the viewing wall. The enthusiastic admiral had parked a quarter of her fleet right at Mars orbit, in plain view for all Imperial detecting appendages to observe. She had swarmed the Oort cloud with detectors and hidden the rest of her ships. If that Imperial Minister had scraped their resources in the region, the Empire would be able to match the entire fleet Sleeth had brought. It would have been enough to annihilate that original protection and more than enough for a decisive victory against the force that was orbiting Mars.

“They have arrived,” from one of the officers.

“Remember that our objective is to *prevent* hostile action. Confirm orders.”

“Confirmed. We will not initiate hostilities.”

“Three hundred vessels. Looks like the first layer of our deception worked.” The Meercians were discussing amongst themselves.

“They actually believed our administration would let such a huge error slip through?”

“Let's hope that assessment is based on their bureaucracy's competences.”

Sleeth interrupted, “I *still* would have expected that minister to use all the Empire's got, even if they believed the deception. Remain on the alert for surprises.”



“That entire fleet is moving in.”

Tension on the bridge increased.

“Negative, that's a negative. They're not moving in, but in orbit around the star.”

Despite the confidence there was a palatable sense of relief at that. Even if they were likely to win the opening battle, they preferred not to have a war at all.

“They must have detected the inner force.” Sleeth nodded to Praidō admiral.  
“We can expect a communication soon.”

The Praidō answered, “Tread lightly if you want to prevent action. It may be smaller than expected, but that force is still capable of taking a huge bite out of the inner force.”

“And they still might have hidden the rest.”

“Single vessel coming in, it's transmitting a diplomatic identity code. Looks like their minister is back for a visit.”

The ten legged arachnid skipped the pleasantries. “I suppose you think yourself very clever.”

Transmission delays meant one had to move closer to each other for a normal conversation. No reasons to go and visit one another's ship and there were more than enough of them to keep it on remote images. That minister did look very smug. “This seems a strange place for maintenance.”

Sleeth made itself look very disappointed at that pronouncement. For once, the

entire mob of Meercians was as silent as the rest of the crew on the bridge.

“Wherever did that rumour originate from?” Sleeth recovered itself with aplomb.  
“tThis modest fleet just happened to be on exercise in the area.”

The admiral joined in, “A courtesy visit to a potential new member race was definitely called for.”

The arachnid hissed in laughter. “No doubt. Why, we ourselves were just on our way to a similar visit.”

Sleeth kept its face frozen, though it could feel the shock of the Meercians behind.

“Though in our case, it is a newly joined subject race.”

*Get out of the viewing area.* Sleeth had kept silent, but the gang moved as if they had been able to catch that thought right from its mind.

“Why, the other half of *our* modest fleet,” the arachnid breathed their enjoyment into that last bit for emphasis, “has already arrived there, but I thought it would be good to make a detour to this planet, Earth, to prevent any mishaps.”

Thanstrztraxiaa's posture changed, raising their body on all ten limbs, front lifted to display the fangs.

“Enough amusements. This is a formal warning to The Triumvirate,” the wall's image changed over to a star map, with a blinking red dot indicating a system just a few hops away, “not to interfere with the new species at this location. The Empire of the Virtuous has accepted them into Our Embrace.” The viewing wall

went blank after that pronouncement, leaving behind the background chatter from the bridge, as officers confirmed that the opposing forces were, indeed, moving out.

It was speechless for a few minutes. Then, Sleeth the Slothainian, Agent from Contact, holder of Class One privileges, ambassador plenipotentiary of The Triumvirate to Earth, had merely one depressing observation to make.

“This,” the good being had to say, “is not going to look good in my report.”

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## Test

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It was a triumph for the science of interstellar travel. The first discovery was that of a wormhole. The second how to enter it. The third that there was a habitable planet at the other end of it, wherever that was. With a distinct lack of originality, it got named Erewhon.

Erewhon was a whole new world to explore, with pristine landscapes and, luck of all lucks, a biosphere that was fully compatible with Earth life. Naturally, Earth's government followed the tradition leaders have followed throughout the millennia when discovering newly discovered territories. It sent the annoying people to this new place. Idealists, political misfits, criminals, and seekers of new opportunities. Every trick from the book was used to encourage, deceive, or bully them into leaving. Most of them even thought it was their own idea. Following another tradition, Earth's government did not even take the trouble to find out whether the new world was already claimed or not.

The western side of the northern continent had rolling plains, unmatched by any on Earth. The temperatures were slightly too high for comfort during the day, with the local sun tending to burn the skin, and slightly too cold in the night. On these plains, a few dozens of miles to the east of the main coastal town, a single figure could be seen riding a horse in the direction of a huge mountain range.

The lone figure did not inspire confidence at first sight. The man was clad entirely in leather, patched so many times one had to wonder whether any of the original suit had remained. The owner was wearing a huge straw hat which, both

here and on Earth, would be the proud owner of the sombrero name. The face, weathered by years of exploration, had a slight green sheen from the sap extracted from the leaves of a local plant that was used as sun screen. The beard gave the impression of someone for whom “shaving” was but a theoretical construct, but who still mowed it occasionally for convenience's sake. The horse he was riding was just as tattered, walking with a stride as if it was tired of life itself. One would be greatly mistaken in that first assessment. Out on the plains people simply did not have the luxury of taking too much care of one's appearance.

Take a closer look at the pair, rider and horse, and one would notice the sparkle of life in the face of the former and the quiet strength in the trot of the latter. This was, indeed, one of those brave scouts who rode out into unexplored areas, facing the known and unknown dangers the planet still threw at them. Ask about Nkosinathi Andersson in any household, and you would be answered by blank stares. Mention the name he was given by his peers and people would excitedly talk about his adventures, for he was widely known as Fur-face.

Suddenly, the horse stood still, sniffing at a trail that crossed its path. Its rider sat as if nothing had happened, though he studied the environment from under the rim of his sombrero. The hand moved onto the holster at his hip, but he was interrupted.

“No need for that,” the voice came from behind a mass of dried bushes, as several people came out in the open. Fur-face relaxed as he stared at the spotless outfits, the meticulous grooming and that awkward stance of those newly arrived on the plains. These people would not be out of place at one of those high society balls the coastal town was famous for.

“What have we here?” The owner of that voice joined the troupe as they

crowded him. They were five in total. “What an oddity.” They all joined in the laughter. “Who’re you?”

“Name is Andersson.”

The name was greeted with incredulous hilarity. The target of their amusement just sat patiently.

“Lemme see that poor beast.” One of them tried to grab his horse’s reins.

“Hold it!” The horse took a step back, shaking off its previous stance with a fierce raise of the head. Its rider, as if out of thin air, had his rifle in his hands. “I know the manners down west, but here on the plains there’s some different ground rules.” The business end moved in their direction. “One of them is, keep your hands off one another’s properties.”

“Are we going to allow this weirdo to threaten us?”

One hand moved to the hip.

“I wouldn’t.” The owner of that hand was suddenly staring down the barrel.

“Another rule, the one with the weapon aimed first gets to say what happens. *Hands up.*”

Even these newcomers knew better than to argue with that.

“Today is your lucky day. Most others out here’d have shot you for that, with nary a sleepless night to pay for it.”

He hung the rifle back into its holder in front of him. "I can see that you're newly arrived entrepreneurs. On your way."

They glanced at each other. Their leader looked tempted to attempt something, but the others had lost any taste for pleasantries and were already leaving.

"Don't attempt to follow us, *Andersson*, if that's your real name."

It was the best retort the leader could manage as he mounted and followed his fellows to the north. The scout just staid put, keeping an eye until the group had ridden well out of sight. "Enough excitement for the day." The scout aimed his horse back to the east.

They rode in companionable silence until sunset, when they reached the top of a hill. "Better check if they're following," the scout muttered to himself. He put his binoculars, a gift from the mayor of Coastown, to his eyes and gave the north a good look-over. Nope, they had kept on going, and the trail showed no sneaky split ups.

Fur-face set up camp. He threw few flowers into the fire. The smell would keep away mosquitoes, some of the first Earth species to hitch a ride to the planet. He had just finished taking care of the horse when a bright star in the south caught his attention.

"New arrivals?" Muttering to himself seemed to be a habit.

It was moving. When it passed overhead, the scout moved to quieten his horse. "There, there. Just a space ship. Not as if you haven't seen one land before." He was studying the light's path when something exploded at the end of it, "I'll agree that we've never seen one crash." Sounds of the crash arrived, powerful

bangs, muffled by the distance. “Looks like we’ll be skipping sleep tonight.”

The first time Fur-face had ridden in the night, he had been eaten alive by those imported blood-suckers. Since then, he had learned to always carry a portable burning pot. He would have the repellent fumes with him when he was forced to make a nightly ride again. Despite this, he still had to swat at the occasional attempt to dine on him and the horse.

The site was a disaster. Some of the surrounding bushes were still on fire, but it seemed that most had been blown away by the explosion. Surprisingly, something still resembling what had been a space ship was resting at the end of a groove. The nose was buried into the sand that had accumulated into a mount in front of it. “Looks like the explosion gave it a shove.”

It also appeared that someone had arrived before him. Several someones.

Fur-face moved into some bushes that had been miraculously untouched to watch the quintuple as they moved the remains of the ship's occupants to the side. Two of them were still alive. Whatever they were. They looked vaguely humanoid, gaunt shapes with long, thin limbs. Those idiots had bound them.

What a way to start first contact.

“The find of a lifetime. See if there's any more of them.” The leader moved to the bound pair. “Inconvenient.” He considered, then in one swift movement took out a knife and cut the throat of one of the aliens. Protests sounded as he moved to the next one, but no one stopped him as he reached it.

Except for a shot from the bushes.



The four others remained silent as the scout moved out to the alien. “Of all the foul things ...” He cut the ropes of the survivor. “I know this bright idea wasn't yours, but really, the four of you should've stopped him.”

He was answered by embarrassed looks. Typical fancy no-spine rich kids.

“Now we'll have to deal with the consequences,” he looked at them as if examining a particularly repulsive bug, “of having *you* as the first impression of our species.”

He checked the alien for obvious wounds.

“Gods help us all.”

His eyes widened as the alien smiled. All around them “dead” aliens were getting up, including the one who had the throat cut, after it snapped the bounds.

“We already had impressions.”

The other aliens were moving into the ship through the hole in the hull.

“Decision was made to solve problem of intrusions.”

The single alien also rose now.

“Wormhole will be closed. Question of humans, already here, remained.”

It also moved towards the ship, which was deforming into a still unfamiliar but space worthy shape.

“Test was devised to help decide.”

The scout had to ask, as the alien fell silent, “Did we pass?”

The alien looked at him, then at the other humans, then joined its fellows in the ship.

Fur-face was still waiting for an answer as the ship rose, lifted its nose and disappeared into the sky.

After a few decades of successful colonisation, contact with Erewhon was lost as the wormhole disappeared mysteriously. Since it was not even known whether the planet was in the same galaxy or not, Earth would never regain contact with its lost colony.

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## Descent

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Many rumours were spread after the wormhole to Earth vanished. The few theoretical physicist that had been allowed to stay at Erewhon had no clue. Given the shaky theoretical grounds that had opened it up in the first place, none of those back home were likely to have one either. The conclusion was stark: roughly fifty million souls were left to deal with the new world on their own.

There were a few murmurs about alien interference, but no one paid any attention to such crackpots, and the people who knew for certain kept their mouths shut about it. They had no wish to be swept together with the madmen, and even if they were believed, the results for them, personally, could be disastrous.

After Fur-face had escorted the four unfortunates back to Coastown, he could almost sense the change. The slow but steady stream of equipment from Earth imports had ensured a firm grip of the authorities. With that flow cut off it was not a question of if but of when use of that equipment would be restricted. Already, suspicious characters were forming groups, planning in the dark corners of the local inns. The least savoury of those were casting hostile looks into his direction. "Not good."

He was well known at the town hall, an impressive concrete building in the shape of a castle straight out of a fairy tale, a witness to the founder's megalomania. "Go ahead, Mr. Andersson. He's busy handling the crisis, but I don't think the mayor will object to a visit from you." Fur-face waved a greeting

at the secretary and walked into the office.

“There's trouble brewing.”

The mayor interrupted his call and turned around. The man looked tired, but managed a smile. “You don't say? Shipments of those last allotments from back home are disappearing all over.”

“No, I meant in town.”

The mayor frowned. “What?”

“How did you get to be mayor?”

“Appointed by the government.”

“Of?”

Understanding dawned, “Shit.”

“Without Earth to back you up, you'd better find another source of authority and the means to enforce it.”

“Shit.”

“Concisely put. You have two main problems. Order on the street and,” Fur-face raised his rifle, “control of production. If you don't move in now, less desirable characters will.”

“Haven't got the manpower, the governor is keeping all of his forces on the south

continent.”

“You're in luck, it's just a matter of knowing the right people. If you'll allow me?”

It was a magnificent team. The giantess caught the eyes first. Clad in a sparkling new leather trapper outfit, two shotguns strapped to her back, Helena Graive's eight feet made for an intimidating figure. Her partner's five feet made her easy to miss next to that. The less polite section of the populace would almost be inclined to laugh at her height. Almost, for Yumi González' grim figure was bristling with throwing knives. The pair of them was known as BFG and Sophie. Next to them was a thin skeletal figure clad in black. His stance exuded the depressing certainty of everyone's ultimate future. It was inevitable that Jeremiah Merch had been named Undertaker at the first opportunity. The pair of youngsters seemed unperturbed, dressed in bright colours, simple guns at the hips. Bai and Bao were unrelated, but people had stamped them with the Zhao Twins name regardless. At least they got to keep their original names. Seven people in total, including Fur-face himself.

Seven?

“Where's the Alchemist?”

BFG answered, “He said he thought he saw some supplies at one of the smithies.”

Fur-face sighed, “I hope that maniac doesn't overdo it.”

“Not as if you didn't know when you asked him to join the party.”

“There's that.”

“So what's the deal?” Sophie was oiling one of her spring knives. “Where is this party?”

“You may have heard the rumours that Earth has stopped sending supplies.”

They nodded at that, uninterested.

“Situation's worse than that. I have it on the best authority,” he left out who, precisely, he had heard the news from, “that Earth isn't going to be able to send anything ...”

“For how long?”

“... ever. The wormhole's gone.”

“Shit.”

“That's what the mayor said.”

“So, what's our job?” Bai asked.

“We've already collected all the gunsmiths and their equipment. Now, we make sure they have a manufacturing plant to produce with.”

“Doesn't the city have their own security for that?” from Bao.

“Security is in way over their heads. They are having enough problems looking all impressive and keeping order. You may have noticed they're not precisely cut

out for the more intensive jobs. The mayor asked me to gather some people who wouldn't mind doing a bit of the hard work in a good cause." He looked them over. "That's us."

They forted up in the plant right outside the city. The Alchemist, carrying a huge grin, joined them, riding on a heavily laden cart.

"Do we dare ask what's in there?"

"Insurance."

"Go ahead, insure away."

"Tell me again why we're not in the town hall." Sophie asked.

"Cause they don't like the mayhem," BFG answered.

Security cameras were going to be in short supply, once they started breaking down. For now, however, the plant was riddled with them. Fur-face and the Alchemist observed the plants' surroundings from the comfort of the security room. "They're moving in."

The Twins were already onto them, taking aim. "Enemy drone down."

"Keep a lookout."

"Tanks incoming, two of them."

Fur-face looked surprised, "Where'd they get those?" Imports of weaponry had been heavily restricted and tanks were on the "do not import" list.

“Creative accounting?” BFG answered over the radio.

“I suppose one could classify it as agricultural equipment,” from Sophie.

“Decades are a long time for nothing to slip through customs,” one of the Twins.

“I don't like it.” The Undertaker.

“You and me both,” Fur-face said, “what other surprises do they have to throw at us?”

“Supposedly, they'd like the factory intact,” came from his side, “so they'll be restricted.”

“Everyone, retreat to the inner perimeter.”

“You're giving the outer one without a fight?”

“Got a bad feeling about this.”

The Alchemist looked at one of the screens. “Your feeling may be right. Hurry up people,” he yelled, “incoming!”

“There goes our drone.” He cursed as he let it kamikaze into the source of the rockets. “I was planning on using that against one of the tanks.”

“It's for a good cause, if it stops any more katyushas.”

Hell arrived at the outer perimeter.



“Everyone got back safely?”

Five answers confirmed everyone was still alive and kicking.

“Tanks moving in.” Sophie remained calm.

“You see where they are moving?”

“Missing our insurance, you mean?”

“Damn, lets see if we can correct that. See the hostiles there?”

The attackers didn't notice their numbers falling to Sophie's knives, but the two shotguns' booming did catch their attention. They had lost a dozen by the time they got behind cover.

“Amateurs.”

“With that equipment they may not need professionals.”

An explosion, just a few feet away, confirmed that assess-ment. “Well, caught the tank's attention. Let's see if we can get it to move here.” Sophie called over the radio, “You getting this, Alchemist?”

“Confirmed.”

They ran away from the vehicle, finding cover behind a ridge. They started shooting at that invading group again.

“It's coming in.”

“Just a few more feet,” the Alchemist was begging the vehicle on.

“Yess!”

A disappointingly muffled bang sounded at first.

“That's all?” BFG screamed into the radio, “What the hell did you do with all those explosives?”

“Economy,” the response was calm. The ground below the tracked vehicle caved in, letting it slant forwards and bury itself halfway. “They're not going to be able to dig that one out without some heavy equipment.”

A few other explosions sounded, dropping a small tower on the group of attackers that they had annoyed earlier.

The Twins and the Undertaker had some trouble of their own. The latter had a shell fragment from a shot from the second tank embedded in his leg.

“Doesn't that hurt?”

“Like the devil stabbed me with his trident and is pissing on the wound.”

He looked at the tank moving in.

“We're dealing with idiots. Going to give a little present.”

He took a sprint towards the Tank, jumped on top, dropped something through

the opened hatch, and jumped off again, rolling away from the vehicle. First a small explosion seemed to be all he had delivered, then a bigger one destroyed the tank, pieces of metal launching in all directions.

The Undertaker, undamaged apart from his earlier wound, stood up again, dusting off his jacket. “See?”

Then he hissed in pain and collapsed.

The twins carried him in, joined by BFG and Sophie.

“Now, we wait for them.”

“And see what I saved the explosives for.”

Some attackers had just moved into the surrounding buildings, checking if there were any defenders left inside. One moment they were there, the next a cloud of dust was all that was left of them.

“If they do continue, it’ll be a hell of a long time before they get here.”

Another building with attackers in it collapsed.

There was one more attack near dawn. The seven held it at the entrance, BFG's booming shotguns and the Twins crowding a growing mass of attackers. Sophie's knives took out the few stragglers that managed to get through. “Love it, when things go right,” a gleeful Alchemist pressed one last button. Explosions moved inwards from the edges of that open area before the entrance, decimating the rabble in a gruesome mass of fire and flying limbs, leaving behind an eerie silence. The attacking force lost its stomach for combat after that.

The next day the mayor sent a wide-eyed clean up crew and security to take over.

“How's the town?”

“Fine. There were a few scuffles, but that's it. Seems most of the rabble was hired to deal with you first.”

Fur-face nudged one of the limbless bodies with his foot. “Any idea who they were sent by?”

“Not a clue, but we have lost contact with several towns, so it appears the action was coordinated across the continent,”

“Say, could you demolish fewer buildings next time?” from the clean up crew.

The Alchemist yelled back, “you prepared to deal with the survivors if we did?”

“Ah, no thanks. Demolish away.”

“Speaking of survivors, have you seen were they went?”

“Not to town. Looks like there'll be trouble for those moving out.”

Yes. Fur-face and his assembled companions looked on as the crew removed the burnt and mangled bodies. There would be trouble.

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## Aid

She realised that she had forgotten something in her spell at the first creaking of the staircase. It had been built quite sturdily, easily able to carry multiple adults. It did have problems dealing with the weight of a juvenile dragon. To be more correct, it didn't deal with it at all.

The innkeeper was apologetic. “Are you sure you are fine?”

“Yes, just shaken a bit.”

“Those stairs really should not have collapsed like that.”

“Really, I am fine.”

“Constructions are not what they used to be. Here, have a cup.”

She got handed a steaming cup of coffee mixed with chicory.

“Thank you.”

“I'll have it rebuild first thing. For now, you can use the servants' stairs, if you don't mind.”

“That'll be fine.”

“Dinner is on the house.”

“Thank you.”

She would make sure to leave some gold coins to cover the cost of her mistake. She took her cup, entered the dining room, and took a quiet seat in the corner. Sipping the coffee as she studied the occupants of the room. One of them stood out with his plain brown robe and shaved head. *A priest?* She recalled her mother's teachings, losing herself to the memory.

“Be wary of anyone who claims to speak for the gods, they tend to crowd out the real messages with their own voices. It is a strong being indeed, who can resist the temptation to do so. Of all the priests, those who follow the Eight Bannered Lord seem to be less susceptible to this defect.” Justice smiled at the recollection. “Must be because they, mostly, never claim to speak for their god. The lord of the banners seems to prefer doves as messengers.”

Her thoughts were interrupted. “That looked like a nasty experience, you okay?”

She looked up to see the priest had walked up to her table.

“A little shaken, that's all.”

She got nervous under the intensity of his gaze, especially when he *sniffed* absently. “Can I sit here?” She nodded her permission. He took a seat.

“I am on a mission, of sorts.”

“From your god?” She could not quite keep the scepticism from her voice.

A small smile answered her. “Would you believe me if I said yes?”

She looked down at her cup. “Maybe.”

“No, to answer your question. There's more than enough to do in the world without needing to twiddle my thumbs waiting for my lord to give me a job.”

“Your mission?”

“I was visiting Dawnto, a small village out near the southern shores. The town had two brewers, who were in friendly competition. Well, one of them thought so.” He sighed, “Jealousy can bring out the worst in people. It ate at the other brewer's soul until, nearly a year ago, it exploded.”

“It got violent?” Justice asked.

“Worse. He poisoned a barrel full of ale. The fool thought that would nicely ruin the competitor's reputation. How he imagined that he could get away with it is beyond me.”

Justice listened, shocked.

“I suspended the victims for a year to give us time to find a treatment.”

“You knew what was used?”

“We managed to find the dealer who had sold the stuff. He thought there was no cure, but it turns out we can prepare an antidote from the leaves of this plant that grows near dragon country. I found sufficient to prepare enough of the antidote to heal all. In fact, I just finished, borrowing the good innkeeper's kitchen.”

He interrupted Justice's relief, "It took too long, I cannot get back in time to administer it, or even find a friendly wizard who could."

"You can't ask your god to intervene?"

"My lord doesn't meddle with the world that often. Disturbs the balance. He leaves cases like mine to the good people in this world to deal with, despite their many failures."

"Does he now." She was thoughtful at that.

He stared sadly, then stood up to leave. "I am sorry to be bothering you with such a story. I guess I needed a sympathetic shoulder to cry on."

She was still thinking deeply when she returned to her room after dinner. By precedence, dragons did not interfere in human affairs, but she and that helpful ambassador had already thrown that out of the window. No, the bigger problem was that she would lose the slim chance she had of finding any trail for her to follow. Not to mention that a dragon flying in human lands would be somewhat conspicuous. She had no wish to alarm people or to send a warning to her quarry, whoever or wherever it was. On the other side of the scales, though, all those people would die for nothing more than a fool's jealousy. Travellers, workers, spouses. *Parents*. She sighed, as she recollected that other sentence her mother had to say about those priests, "If anyone can be trusted, it's those who work in the field for the Lord of the Banners."

"I don't think I can handle another failure." The priest sat at the desk, his pained face evident. He safely stowed four bottles of the precious liquid in his luggage, whatever good that would do. He had thought he had sensed his lord's push to



the girl, so he had talked to her. It turned out to be wishful thinking. No outside help was forthcoming. No last minute miracles. *Again*. Still, something had been different about her.

*The smell?*

His thoughts turned back to his current problem. Even if he could get the fastest horses, with refreshments along the route, he would arrive weeks too late. He dropped his head in his hands.

*Too late.*

A light tapping on the window disturbed his desperation. He looked up, reflections blocked the view from the night outside. Again, a light tap, almost as if something was scratching the pane. He walked up to the window, opening it to get a better look. A voice came out of the darkness, from one side. He heard the solution he had been seeking with such great effort, filling him with renewed hope. It was delivered by a voice that was infused with restrained power and proud formality.

“Thou hast need of transport?”

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## El Viejito

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My husband wanted a crocodile farm.

Yes, really. Those big-snouted reptiles with jaws that can just about crush anything. His favourite was called El Viejito, meaning the little old one. A horrendous specimen, nearly twenty feet long. We inherited that one from the farm's previous owner, who told us it was already over fifty years old. Do not expect those old monsters to be slow, though. It is still impressing the hell out of any wide-eyed tourist that sees it leap out of the water to fetch its chicken dinner. My husband loved it like a lost family member the day he put his eyes on it.

We were on holiday in Costa Rica at the time. It is a popular destination amongst the eco-tourists. Peaceful land, wonderful people, and beautiful natural miracles. Rainforests, beaches, mountains, the whole deal. The husband was a bit of a reptile nut, so he wanted to visit *El Serpentario*, *La Selvita* and, of course, *La Granja de Iguanas y Cocodrilos*.

He was fascinated by the snakes, especially with the show they put on. All those different species shown and, as the *pièce de résistance*, the cobra being fed a live mouse. To my husband's disappointment it was drugged. Apparently the poor cobra had one of its eyes poked out by one of the previous victims and they did not want that show repeated. Personally, I would have cheered the little vermin.

Sue me.

The visit to the national park disappointed him even more. I found it absolutely enchanting, despite having to check my shoes for scorpions each morning. I have heard they pack a nasty sting. That rainforest is a true natural treasure. Unfortunately, from his perspective, not a single reptile or amphibian crossed our path. It seemed as if they were avoiding us. We *did* get pooped on by the local howler monkeys.

So, there.

My husband was prepared to be let down again when we found the closed sign at the entrance of the farm. Our tour guide, being acquainted with the owner, convinced him to show one last group around. My husband marvelled at the green iguanas, but his eyes positively shone at the sight of the biggest crocodile we had ever seen. By god! It honestly leaped its full length out of the water to reach a dangling chicken. Back then, El Viejito was kept permanently hungry, you see. Nowadays, we feed the poor beast well enough. Getting it to jump half out of the water is quite enough, thank you.

We had a nice dinner of home grown tree chicken after that. Yes, yes. I know that is what the locals call those iguanas they feed to the tourists. In truth? They *do* taste like chicken.

We chatted with the owner, a cheery old man wearing a reed hat, called Louis. Louis had gotten sick and tired of caring for the farm, so he wanted to sell it off. That is why he had closed down for the day, to ride a horse to visit a potential buyer.

Oh dear.

My husband's eyes were shining even more brightly now. He had just one

question: “How much?”

Just like that.

No question. No discussions. Not even a glance at me. He had not even seen the rest of the farm yet.

The deal was sealed that evening. The money, our life savings, was transferred in record time, so the next day we were left alone as the proud new owners of a crocodile farm.

And El Viejito. A very, very hungry Viejito.

My *late* husband wanted a crocodile farm.

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